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ABSTRACT

This paper examines factors contributing to the underrepresentation of black children in gifted and talented education programs. The paper reviews the history of school desegregation and finds that integration and equal educational opportunity for minority students have yet to be achieved. The persistent maintenance of cultural control by the white majority, the dominant group in American society, is seen as the chief obstacle to educational equality. Minority student participation in gifted education is limited by the following factors: (1) lack of agreement about the definition of giftedness; (2) the use of inappropriate or biased assessment instruments; and (3) restricted identification procedures. Definitions of giftedness are seen as broad, open to many interpretations, and reflective of middle class, dominant cultural values and perceptions. Further, most gifted programs place heavy emphasis on the results of intelligence tests to determine whether or not a child is gifted; these, along with creativity tests and achievement tests, which are also used to identify giftedness, may reflect bias in favor of children raised in the affluent dominant culture in the United States. Beyond the use of assessment instruments, the paper discusses limitations of other identification procedures, including nomination by teachers, peers, parents, or self, rating scales, and observations. A list of 31 references is appended. (AF)

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Examining Black Underrepresentation in Gifted Programs

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Examining Black Underrepresentation in Gifted Programs

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled in the case of Brown v. Board of Education and brought about a social transformation in the United States. The ruling was supposed to establish equal educational opportunities for all black children. Integration began slowly because many whites did not want to share their schools with blacks. Now after 36 years, are all black children really receiving equal educational opportunities?

All children have a right to equal educational opportunities. The concept of equal education has been defined as free education, common curriculum, same school, and same locality (Coleman, 1974). Programs such as, special education, gifted and talented, drama, etc., should be accessible for minority groups. In the United States, there are several subordinate or minority groups. Women, blacks, Hispanics, and orientals are classified as minority groups. The literature shows the number of minority children in the above programs do not match the percentage of the minority groups in the schools (Baldwin, 1987; Frasier, 1987; Mitchell, 1988).

In this paper, I will examine why black children are underrepresented in gifted and talented programs. I believe all children have the right to reach their full potential. A low percentage of gifted and talented black children are being identified (Frasier, 1984) and given the opportunity to be in a program that will hopefully help them reach their full potential.

This paper will explore some of the reasons why these children are being overlooked.

A Brief History Of Desegregation

Events of the 1950s changed the structure of education in the United States. In that decade, blatant, open, and raw racism was a fact of life in the South (Carter, 1979). "Black children were openly short-changed in per capita pupil allocations and in every other educational resource" (Carter, 1979, p. 616). The situation in the North was slightly better. "There were no express laws requiring racial separation, nor was there the explicit short-changing of blacks through per capita pupil allocations" (Carter, 1979, p. 618). On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court made a decision in the now famous Brown v. Board of Education case. The court ruled that school segregation policies in the North and the South were unconstitutional (England & Meier, 1985). In 1955, the Brown II ruling ordered local school officials to desegregate public schools with all deliberate speed (England & Meier, 1985). Compliance with the law was slow in coming. Racial segregation was a product of white supremacy beliefs which continue to be a part of the dominant culture. Educational structures and cultural attitudes had to be destroyed or at least reworked. The dominant culture, whites, did not want to relinquish any of its power and control to a minority group, blacks.

School officials were told to comply with the letter of the law, desegregation, but they did not fulfill the spirit of the law, integration. Desegregation and integration are similar terms but they are not alike. According to England and Meier (1985), desegregation is a process that requires mixing students

of different races, and integration is a condition in which minority students are accepted and treated as equals. Desegregation can be thought of as a mechanical process, whereas integration is a social process. Many people misuse and interchange these terms. In the long run, desegregation is much easier to achieve than integration.

Cultural Control

Why is integration of a minority group into the majority group difficult to achieve? In a comparative study of race and power, Baker (1983) showed that the dominant group, whites, usually treated the minority group, blacks, "as a pawn that responds or reacts passively or automatically to dominant group actions" (p. 4). He also found minority group members "assess situations and make choices, but their choices are usually" (Baker, 1983, p. 4) narrowed by the dominant group's power. Whites believe in the superiority of their culture and assume minority groups will accept this perception. This idea leads to conflict between cultural groups, like Native Americans and blacks. "Individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others in terms of real or imagined characteristics" (Baker, 1983, p. 10), such as physical, cultural factors, and modes of behavior. This defining of self or group identity can lead to the assertion of superiority by one person or group over another which is a definition of racism. This is why integration of blacks into the white culture is difficult.

The acquisition of white culture and behavior by blacks seldom provides entry into white social structures. If this is

true, how can blacks assimilate into the dominant culture? First, they need to overcome racism. This is not an easy task since no single factor explains or accounts for racism. Three of the most important factors of racism are identity, power, and psychology (Baker, 1983). Blacks will have to overcome or change whites' attitudes about the 'American Creed' which is written for whites only. The minority group needs to break the control over power the dominant group has. The dominant group is very powerful and cannot be broken down unless the minority group "reaffirms and reasserts its cultural or group identity" (Baker, 1983, p. 197). Overcoming the psychological factor or mind set is very difficult. The dominant group is not going to be open to change just because it is in control and sees no reason to change.

The extent of racism "varies in different regions and localities, but usually includes some degree of restriction on educational and economic opportunities, as well as social exclusion by whites and an attribution by whites of intellectual inferiority" (Katz, 1974, p. 207). Having grown up in the south, I believe many whites still believe blacks are intellectually inferior and only worthy of vocational education and low status jobs. In an article on the inheritance of IQ and scholastic achievement, Jensen (1969) discusses how average blacks have a lower IQ than average whites and that the black students should be funneled into vocational classes. Intelligence is partially controlled by genetics, and Jensen (1969) believes eugenics should be practiced to rid society of lower IQ black people. Jensen's article contains many ideas of racism, power, and dominance. After reviewing Jensen's article, Conwill (1980) believes the article exerted

an impact on education.

The idea of equal educational opportunities is not always endorsed by the dominant culture, but it is still a goal in American education. Unfortunately, many educators assume this concept means "opportunity lies in exposure to a given curriculum" (Coleman, 1974, p. 6). This implies the school and the community have a passive role in educating children, and they do not. Communities need to involve themselves in their schools by learning about the schools, volunteering in the schools, and supporting the schools monetarily. Community leaders, especially minority ones, should be role models for students. School administrators need to be in the school and classrooms observing what is happening and be visible to the teachers and students. The only way to reech educational equality is by achieving the same results of schooling (achievement and attitudes) for racial minorities as for the dominant group (Coleman 1974). This can happen when the school and the community take an active role in educating children, especially minority children.

Underrepresentation of Blacks in Gifted Programs

Equal educational opportunities affect all school programs including gifted and talented. In American schools, minorities, especially blacks, are minimally represented in programs for gifted children (Frasier, 1984). There are a number of reasons why this is true. Minority student participation in gifted programs is limited by 1) the lack of agreement about the definition of giftedness, 2) the use of inappropriate or biased assessment instruments, and 3) restricted identification procedures

(Yancey, 1983).

Problems Of Defining Giftedness

Many experts in the field of gifted education believe that the lack of clarity and precision in the definition of giftedness is one reason why minorities are underrepresented (Yancey, 1983). Most definitions of giftedness are broad and open to many interpretations. They reflect middle class, dominant cultural values and perceptions (Sisk, 1988). Definitions usually include some reference to above average intelligence, above average creativity, and internal motivation. Leadership ability and psychomotor ability is tacked on to some definitions, e.g., the Marland report. It is easy to see that the parts of the definitions of giftedness can be interpreted to mean whatever a school district or state wants.

Problems With Assessment Instruments

The second reason why minorities are underrepresented is the use of inappropriate or biased assessment instruments. Most gifted programs place heavy emphasis on the results of intelligence tests to determine whether or not a child is gifted. There is no national standard for an IQ score to designate giftedness, so the schools can select whatever cutoff score they want. The schools can mandate or control how much educational opportunity a child is guaranteed according to his/her IQ score (Gordon, 1974). Unfortunately, many educators, black and white, work under society's assumption that blacks have lower IQs than whites. This supports the idea of white superiority. However, researchers have been and are investigating this assumption to try to establish its existence. In the 1970s, much of the difference in

average IQ scores between blacks and whites in America can be attributed to more frequent intrauterine problems and less favorable family and environmental conditions among black children (Storfer, 1990). Blacks are more likely to suffer from these problems which tend to depress IQ scores. During the past 50 years, a considerable increase in the IQ scores of blacks dispels the idea that blacks are `genetically inferior' and strongly suggests the `IQ gap' between blacks and whites is not an immovable barrier (Strofer, 1990). Recent research also shows a connection between the mother's age and her child's IQ. The younger the mother, the lower the child's IQ will be. It seems women can raise their child's IQ by waiting to have children until they are in their thirties and forties. Another factor affecting IQ is how many children are in a family. "The greater the number of children, the lower their IQs will tend to be, (especially if they are closely spaced)" (Storfer, 1990, 122). Both of these factors have a bearing on blacks since many black women in their teens are having children which in turns means they are more likely to have large families.

Besides IQ scores, creativity test scores are used to determine whether or not a child is gifted. Schools or districts can decide the cutoff score for their gifted programs on these tests. Unlike intelligence tests, blacks tend to do well on creativity tests. Creativity is one of the main strengths of minority children (Torrance, 1978a). According to Torrance (1978a), tests of creative thinking ability have practically no racial or socioeconomic bias. The Torrance Test of Creative Thinking is one

test that is used quite often to test for creativity even though its validity is questionable (Frasier, 1987). The test is not 100% culturally fair, as Torrance claims, because the child must rely on his/her experiences to do many of the tasks. Many minority children because of environmental factors do not have the same type of experiences which children in the dominant culture do. Because of this difference, it is not fair to rate a child's performance on another culture's norms. To solve this problem, test makers need to standardize the norms or create a different creativity test for each cultural group.

Achievement tests are also used to identify giftedness in children. Many black children do not do as well as white children on achievement tests. One reason is the tests are "often standardized on populations that do not include a representative sample from all economic levels, racial groups, and cultural groups" (Sisk, 1988, p. 139). Torrance (1978b) believes achievement tests are biased in favor of children raised in the dominant affluent culture in the United States. This idea makes sense because it helps whites "prove" their superiority over blacks. Another reason why blacks do not perform as well as whites on achievement tests is whites are usually taught that tests are important, and test scores are valued by society. Most blacks do not have this notion about tests and do not value them. In short, white children are taught to be test achievers while black children are not.

Restrictive Identification Procedures

Black students are kept out of gifted programs by restrictive identification procedures. These identification procedures

include intelligence tests, achievement tests, creativity tests; teacher, peer, self, and parent nominations, rating scales, and observations. The first three are examples of biased or inappropriate assessment instruments which have already been discussed. Nominations are typically used to select students for a talent pool. Following selection, students are given tests designed to reflect intelligence and/or creativity and/or achievement, if they have not been previously tested. It is important to remember that if a student is not nominated, he/she will probably not go through the testing procedures.

There are several ways to nominate students for gifted programs. Teachers have an important role in finding gifted children in their classrooms. Many teachers are not aware of ways to identify gifted children of any race, especially blacks. Many reasons exist for this. One is teacher training does not help teachers understand different cultural styles and values (Sullivan, 1973). The second reason is ignorance of the general characteristics of giftedness (Lindstrom and Van Sant, 1986), especially gifted black children. A third reason is teachers may be operating under the assumption that giftedness does not exist in minority groups, e.g. blacks. These reasons need to be investigated further to find a solution to these problems. A study by Meier (1984) shows a positive relationship between the number of black teachers in a school and the number of black children identified as gifted in the school.

Parents can nominate their child for a gifted program. Unfortunately, schools do not always use parents as a source of

information about a child. The parents have known the child longer than the school, so their input should be highly valued. Like many educators, parents are ignorant as to how to spot giftedness in their child. Black parents may be operating under the assumption that black children cannot be gifted (Sisk, 1988). At times, programs for the gifted are considered "elitist" (Baldwin, 1987, p. 273), and black parents may not want their child in an `elitist' program. Some people in the black community see an `elitist' program as a way to take away a black child's cultural identity. Parents do not want to nominate their child for a program that would turn him/her against his/her culture.

A child can nominate himself/herself or his/her peers can nominate him/her for a gifted program. Children can do a good job of picking out the bright students in their classes. Again, underlying assumptions can keep black children from being nominated or nominating themselves. One assumption is black children do not belong in gifted programs because they are not bright or talented enough. Others assume gifted programs are only for middle to upper class white children. There is also peer pressure not to try to get into a gifted program because the program is seen as a tool the majority culture uses to gain success (Lindstrom & Van Sant, 1986). The struggle by the black child to reach his/her full potential but to stay in his/her cultural community can keep him/her from trying to get in the gifted program.

Rating scales and observations are also part of the identification procedures. If teachers are trained to look for characteristics of gifted and talented black children, then rating

scales and observations can be used in identification. Teachers need to know the characteristics of minority gifted children. Some of these are alert curiosity, originality and creativity in thinking, resourceful, fluency in nonverbal communication, and learning quickly through experience (Sisk, 1988). These children are usually highly creative in music, movement, dance, and other physical activities. Their language is rich in imagery. When observing a child, teachers must realize physical traits and socioeconomic factors do not determine the potential for giftedness (Frasier, 1987).

Discussion And Conclusion

Many social scientists recognize that the major shortcomings of the attempts to educate black youngsters center around the inability and unwillingness to accept children who are culturally different from white children (Henderson & Washington, 1975). Educators need to recognize that cultural differences exist between blacks and whites when they are trying to identify gifted and talented children. Characteristics of gifted children vary due, in part, to what characteristics are valued by their particular cultural group.

Those who identify children for gifted and talented programs must recognize the characteristics of black gifted and talented children. They need to be sensitive to black cultural values and patterns. Some studies show black teachers do a better job of identifying black gifted children than white teachers do. This could relate to the theory of whites thinking blacks are intellectually inferior. It could be unconscious racism or blatant

racism.

The dominant culture is giving up some of its power to be able to identify more black children for gifted and talented programs. The black community has to gain more power in the schools and see they can make a difference. According to Meier and England (1984), in school districts with a high percentage of blacks on the school board, proportionately more blacks are admitted to gifted programs. Black parents need to push for a variety of identification procedures because "the gifted are a diverse group capable of diverse expression of the talents" (Frasier, 1987, p. 174). Diverse procedures can be used without eroding the quality of a gifted program.

Thirty-six years has passed since school districts were ordered to desegregate. Desegregation and integration began and continue today. Both of these policies are meant to provide equal educational opportunities for all cultural groups. No cultural group has a monopoly on gifts and talents, but blacks are still underrepresented in gifted and talented programs. The children in gifted programs should closely represent the cultural groups in the school district. Set quotas or percentages or special slots for minority children should not exist in gifted programs. If the identification process is changed and cultural values are taken into consideration, these children will be identified along with white children. Blacks and whites have many erroneus assumptions which they must give up before the cultural system of majority power rules will change. The dominant culture cannot attempt to make up for more than 200 years of discrimination against minorities in American schools. All

cultures have to work together to provide equal educational opportunities for all children regardless of race or creed.

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